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Abstract

The hallway as a metaphor for a person at a specific time in their life. Beyond the personal narrative, what is the minimum sensory input one needs to perceive/feel/sense/experience a mental state? Is it possible to apply the literary theory of omission to my work? Making art as a writer. Write like a visual artist. Looking at parallels between the act of writing and making visual art in representing/registering a mind state using objects and spaces. What is an essence in art work and how can literary theories help me to get to this essence?

Introduction

My years of studying fine arts at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy: Start from a personal fascination, research, search, see, read, watch, write, sketch, try, make, fail, fail again, fail better, review, talk to my teachers, single out the objections I have to my work, rethink, redo, use the objections in my new work, REPEAT. All of a sudden 5 years of my life went by and alarm bells go off: time to get to grips with my work. What is it about? What is it that is so important to me? I need to know. I've had 5 years to figure it out. Better look back and see some kind of link between the works I produced over the years.

Scrolling through the files on my laptop, my external hard disk, the poorly executed recordings of my hard work, most striking/obvious is my personal image language; my visual handwriting is all over the works. This distracts me, it almost leads me to believe that my work is about certain materials, colours, components, media. But I try not to be fooled, these are certainly aspects that are close to me, elements that intentionally work in service of the issue I want to address. However they can't be mistaken for the topic/theme of my work or my miniature oeuvre for that matter.

To get to the theme/ topic, more serious digging is needed. More mind maps, descriptions of my fascinations/collections and maybe some help from the analytic-type fellow students and teachers follow. Now that I need to start writing my thesis I should really figure out what was going on these past academic years. What will be the theme of my thesis? What are my research questions? How is this related to my practice?

Please let some kind of link become obvious? At least a hundred times I felt incredibly close to the core, the essence of what my practice is about. Moments in which the universe, the purpose of life and my birthday all miraculously coincided. To top it all off, even the song cheering me on via my trusty headphones became the perfect soundtrack to my euphoric epiphany. That's where it's at. This line about the work of that artist just explains it all, that artist just said it (!), this work and that photograph just absolutely add up, at times my teacher seems to see right through me. But an equal hundred subsequent times there I am, just riding my bike home from school and it already doesn't seem complete or exact enough. I'll try to put it into words, absence versus presence, outlines, negatives, spaces in spaces, constructing a mental space, a vessel for the remainder, a stage for absence, a

shrine for emptiness and repetition, the search for what is not there.

Meanwhile, the thesis already started writing itself. And I still produce work that may or may not be considered art. My headphones keep blasting soundtrack after soundtrack to more imaginary badass writings, turnkey sketches and bang-on mind map scraps stuck to the wall with poster stickies. However deadlines for a group editing session make me painfully aware of the lack of grip on an actual theme. Why is it so hard to extract what lies beneath?

The simple fact that things bear a possibility to be boiled down fascinates me. In literature, writers are very aware of their theme, or at least that's how it seems to me. It feels like they work the other way around, like they consciously and deliberately work on a theme and construct a surface story that conveys or evokes that theme without ever literally touching upon it. What can I learn from the position, attitude and work process of a writer? How are the practices of a writer of fictional prose and a sculptor similar and what can we learn from each other?

Researching and writing about sculptures and stories

To help me draw parallels between creating visual art and writing prose, and to see how one can benefit or learn from the other, I decided to choose 2 sculptural works from a contemporary artist and 2 short stories (both written less than 10 years ago) as my research material. I want to see what is going on in these works, what do I see/read, what techniques have been used? What elements can I extract? Which choices have been made? What is the subject of the work and what is the discrepancy between the artist's intentions and my reception of it. In which ways are they similar and how do the works differ in their attempt to create a human presence /

state of mind? In my conclusion I'll talk about the pro's and con's of applying literary techniques to the practice of a visual artist.

I choose to focus on sculptures because I feel they are close to my own practise and short stories because in comparing making art with the act of writing, I feel a single sculpture can be best compared to a single piece of written prose that has the length/size of a short story. This way I can focus on the written words, passages as well as the whole story. The same approach I can apply to dealing with a single sculpture.

My initial interest in the works of Rachel Whiteread, considering her architectural references, the monumental character of her works and the striking way in which she seemingly puts objects through 'her usual process' lead me to choose the following 2 - rather early - works by her: *Shallow Breath, 1988* and *Untitled (Bath), 1990*¹.

Story 'Roy Spivey' by Miranda July and story 'Cindy Stubenstock' by A.M. Homes from 'The Book of Other People' (stories selected by Zadie Smith) where chosen because of the fact that these are short stories that were written as an attempt to create characters and are both written by writers who share a talent for making something recognizably human out of words.

What do I see? What do I read?

Rachel Whiteread, Shallow Breath, 1988, Plaster, polystyrene (191 x 93 x 18 cm):

A white basement-like room with gray floor. The surroundings look more industrial or rugged than the usual white cube gallery space. The bricks on the wall are painted white. There

¹ Imagery of Whiteread's works as well as both short stories are included in slip cover.

is sunlight coming from windows a little higher on the left. The plaster sculpture is positioned vertically leaning against the wall. The sculpture is as long and wide as a single bed, it seems thinner than a single bed mattress. It has 4 holes and 5 horizontal slim rectangle indents embossed in it. The sunlight coming in through the window projects the shadows of the window-frames onto the sculpture and gives the sculpture its shadow on the floor.

*Rachel Whiteread, Untitled (Bath), 1990, Plaster, glass
(103 x 105 x 209,5 cm):*

A white cube with light grey floor. Sculpture that consists of 6 plaster blocks of equal size put together and a glass plate that acts as a lid on top. There are 2 vertical holes in the glass lid just like there are 2 horizontal holes in the two plaster blocks facing me. Traces of rust come from the holes in the plaster blocks. Underneath the glass lid there is a cavity just like in a regular bathtub.

Roy Spivey by Miranda July:

A 10 page story with two major characters, Roy Spivey (more or less an anagram for the real name of a famous actor) and the I (the woman who tells the story). The story can be divided in 3 in time slots; the day she met Roy Spivey, 'some incidents as her life proceeded', and the day she told the story, the present.

What do we learn about the I:

Woman, 1.80m tall, is used to travel by plane, knows all about famous people, reads tabloids, star struck, is not assertive, wants to be protected by a man, is quite underwhelmed with her life, is insecure, is married and has a daughter, father died of lungcancer. Her life passed and she stood by and watched it go.

Cindy Stubenstock by A.M. Homes:

A 7 page story about Cindy Stubenstock, a middle aged woman who is living the highlife. The story consists mainly of dialogue between Cindy S., her famous sister Sally Stubenstock and their 4 girlfriends. What do we learn about Cindy: 48 yrs of age, married to a wealthy businessman, into art trading, dependent on sedatives to keep going, not very smart or intelligent, ignorant, has an anxiety disorder, prudish, nostalgic, hypocrite.

And then what happened?

Cindy Stubenstock bought a Whiteread bookcase (second line, page 4). In an attempt to create a more relaxing atmosphere in her home, she traded black paintings for white, 'colorless' art. As a matter of fact she did not only trade the dark for the light, she also moved ahead in time from the abstract expressionist art by Motherwell and Still (40's-70's) to Whiteread's *Untitled (Paperbacks)* from 1997 and Richter's *Snow White edition*, 2005. To top it all off, she bought a work by Robert Ryman, the godfather of the monochrome white on white painting. This is as white as white can get.

Cindy's choice for a bookcase' and not *Shallow Breath* or *Untitled (Bath)* seems random as all three sculptures are white and would probably go equally well with the sofa and the rug in her living room. However, what Cindy lacks and what the bookcase can give her is the air of knowledge. What can be more soothing than owning a bookcase containing all this intrinsic knowledge while at the same time you'll never have to face the audacious goal of acquiring any of it. The impossibility of reading the now absent books, which only presence lies in the imprints they left in the casting process of the bookcase, gives her permission to show off without any obligations. The ultimate opportunity to ooze intellectualism

without ever having to make an effort to become an intellectual yourself. Besides, buying work from an artist that is well known and respected but who is not so much in it for the money or the fame as some of her fellow YBA's might be considered an intellectual statement in itself.

As Cindy buys Whiteread's work, I feel like Homes tries to tell me something. There is more that connects these works than meets the eye. Don't get distracted by the married middle-aged women, dead fathers, cancer, artists, white art, airplanes, colourlessness and anxiety disorders they have in common. This is merely 'what it looks like' (the surface story). Take a look beyond the façade of appearances, characteristics, places and spaces. What is the connection, the ground motif, that what makes these works intriguing to me? It might even tell me something about myself. By highlighting mere superficiality and mentioning what seemed to me like a completely coincidental connection between one of 'my stories' and 'my artist', Homes draws me towards the one quality the works have in common. Which, for lack of a better and less grotesque description, I would like to describe as 'personal truth'; me longing for it, Whiteread preserving it, July revealing/intensifying it and Homes defying it. How did they establish this truth and what can I learn from them?

On a quest for personal truth

These are the specs that tell you this is recognizably true (to me), authentic. I buy into this. This work affects me. The elements are incredibly specific and convince only if they are as concise and precise as they need to be. It's not about how well something is done, it's about what is done and what is left undone. What is shown and what is told and what was chosen to be left unsaid.

Truth not as a Platonic metaphysical truth that lies beyond

our reach. Neither as the rational truth Descartes believed he could uncover by scrutinizing reality with knowledge. I'm talking about a much more subjective truth, a truth that isn't given and can't be found, a constructed truth. It does not derive from some transcendental source, nor does it have a factual ground, it's a matter of how the world/the works come(s) across.

What/who resonates with me?

Rachel Whiteread, Shallow Breath, 1988

Some excerpts:

Leaning against the wall, a little bend forward. // *The sculpture gets a 'posture'.*

Standing in a corner of a basement-like space. // *This item is stored for its fall into oblivion.*

The title: 'Shallow breath' // *Makes you look at to sculpture as something with the ability to breathe. The horizontal indents immediately act as a ribcage and the stiffness of the plaster shows the inability to breathe (deep).*

The work looks fragile standing in the corner, with the frail sunbeams lightly touching its skin.

How did Whiteread create the sense of presence I encounter when looking at this sculpture? Not only does she suggest so by giving the work its title. It is the way the sculpture is positioned, the size of a single bed that has such a clear relationship to the size of a human body. But on top of it all, and this might just be my trained bio-medic eye, Whiteread's signature plaster treatment in this work reminds me of the process of fixation. The way corpses are treated in the morgue

to be able to store them indefinitely waiting for further analysis. Whiteread's 'plaster-fication' retained the tissues of this specimen as fully as possible the form they had in life. She even managed to preserve a hint of the life it lived. On the dissection table before me lies a man, a big old man that had shrunk significantly the last years of his life. His wife died a couple of years earlier on the operating table. Right then he decided to donate his body to science. Hence our post-mortem acquaintance. He was born alone and died alone. His life was that of a hard working wage earner, a typical breadwinner of his day and age. Whatever life threw at him, he stood strong. When there was no more need to feed anyone, his job was done. He lit his final cigarette and inhaled his last breath.

Which reminds me: Always be careful, anything that will fix your specimen is also capable of fixing you!

Rachel Whiteread, Untitled (Bath), 1990

Some excerpts:

Solid plaster blocks with cavity that fits a human body. // *Between tomb and tub.*

The size of the blocks // *A proof of its logic.*

The holes in the glass top // *Peek holes as well as nostrils, keeping it from suffocating or being locked up inside.*

The rust coming from the holes in the plaster // *This thing is for real, it's not some kind of aesthetic bogus, it is part of the process.*

This time the title of the work is slightly less 'telling',

Whiteread merely informs us of its origin/descent: 'Bath'. The specifics of this specimen derive from its physical features, from what is shown. The link between sculpture and body is as obvious as in the sculpture addressed above. There even seems to be a specific space for the body to fit in, but because that cavity is closed off with a see through glass lid, in my eyes it acts more like a space to contain the remainder of a physical body: its elusive spirit. The two holes in the glass lid act on me as nostrils, holes to breathe through, to prevent the mystic presence from (further) suffocation. Like the 2 holes in the plaster block, they become some kind of body cavities, both in- and outlets that allow communication between me and the entity inside. The brown rusty traces indicate earlier attempts of reaching out. The fact that the work is showcased like we are used to, white cube and all, takes me away from the morgue-like place that is associated with the process of fixation. In my perception, there was no whole-body specimen that could be fixated to begin with, all that Whiteread could capture in 1990 was the fleeting spirit of the lady that once inhabited the top floor of her house. The bath proved to be the ideal place to keep her in. She would take frequent baths to relieve her of the stress she lived under, all self-imposed but as time went by just as inevitable. Bath time would be the only time her footsteps would not echo in the staircase. Here she washed away her sorrows and watered down her responsibilities.

Roy Spivey by Miranda July

July knows her lead character very well and in her attempt to bring her to life in the story, she uses a balanced alternation of both telling and showing. Telling by having her main character literally tell us about the perks of being a pushover, a tall woman, etc. Subsequently in order to show not tell, she sets up a meeting with another rather specific

character (famous actor Roy Spivey), an encounter that will trigger certain kinds of behaviour in her protagonist.

Some excerpts:

Roy Spivey shifted in his seat, waking. I quickly shut my own eyes, and then slowly opened them, as if I, too, had been sleeping. // *Insecure and aware of it, she does not want to be held accountable for the spying she might have done while he was asleep. So she fakes simultaneously waking up with him.*

I tossed handfuls of water toward my armpits and they landed on my skirt. It was made from the kind of fabric that turns much darker when it is wet. This was a real situation I had got myself into. // *Overly self-aware and very occupied with what others might think of her. Has a hard time putting things into perspective.*

I let go of the idea of cleaning and just hoped that I would get to bed at a reasonable hour. // *Letting go of living up to expectations (whether or not her own) and control of her life. Surrendering to the unknown.*

I thought I had lost it long ago, but, no, there it was, folded underneath a dried-up carnation and some impractically heavy bracelets. // *Holding on to stuff she does not use or need just like the number...Not willing to part with them or just postponing deciding what to do with them. They seem to all end up in the same box.*

Our ancient cat pressed itself against my legs, wanting food. But I couldn't seem to stand up. Minutes passed, almost an hour. Now it was starting to get dark. My husband was downstairs making a drink and I was about to stand up. Crickets were chirping in the yard and I was about to stand up.

// Everything around her keeps going and asks her to do the same, but she is not able to do so. But she intends to.

Everything that happens to her in the story provides us with unequivocal examples in which the character takes shape and where we get the opportunity to add new characteristics to the persona we build in our minds. These characteristics are not all literally extractable from her behaviour in specific situations, a significant sign of her insecurity and self-awareness can also be read from how often she answers with "OK" in a conversation. "OK", a quick reply that depending on the intonation, or in this case depending on the interpretation of the person she talks to, can have a wide range of meanings. To be determined by the other.

Cindy Stubenstock by A.M. Homes

Some excerpts:

'Do we really need to take two planes?'

'Well, there are six of us and I just hate being crowded, and besides, what if I want to leave early?' They all nod, knowing the feeling.

// Giving a clear idea of the level of high-life Cindy lives and at the same time how much she got caught up in it.

'Just the thought of being trapped somewhere makes me nervous – does anyone have anything – a little blue, a little yellow?'

'I've got Ativan.'

'I'll take it.'

// Anxiety disorder with a rather low threshold. But since they all carry sedatives, apparently this has become a way of life.

'People donate flights – for those who are basically too sick

to travel.'

'Oh, I don't think I could ever do that – I couldn't have a sick person on the plane – I mean, what about the germs?'

'I don't normally think of cancer as contagious.'

'You never know.'

// Ignorant and superstitious. Afraid of the unknown, and not knowing a lot.

'What's for dinner tonight?' someone asks.

'A big corned-beef sandwich. That's what I go to Miami for – Wolfie's. I get sick every time – but I can't resist. It reminds me of my grandparents – and of my childhood.'

'I thought you were a vegetarian?'

'I am.'

// Longing for the times when life was simple and good. Idealist whenever it suits her, but does not care what others think of it.

'What are you doing?'

'We're going from day to night – swapping all the black paintings for white, we sold the Motherwells and the Stills and now she's bringing in Ryman, Richter and a Whiteread bookcase.'*// Art as an extension or display of her personality (on the one hand part of interior decoration on the other, as status symbol). Artist names proof that she is knowledgeable and give her an air of worldliness. This is the realm she feels comfortable in and at the same time she uses art as a tool to make herself comfortable.*

The whole story can be summarized as a collection of conversations Cindy and her girlfriends have while going on a trip. Each dialogue either shows how little Cindy knows, or has Cindy demonstrate her expert knowledge on a matter (mostly art). By eavesdropping in on Cindy and her girlfriends, we get

to know her. Some parts are more literal than others, but by putting Cindy in this situation with others around her (to react and relate to) Homes constructs a situation in which it is all show, no tell. Nevertheless it feels like Homes knowledge of her main character is not as in-depth as July's. But I might be deceived as this could also be a result of the shallowness that oozes off of Cindy's character onto the entire story.

How is this personal truth established?

Whether or not applied consciously, I believe these works convince me by showing, not telling. Even though this 'technique' is drawn from literary theory, it seems just as applicable to Whiteread's sculptures as it is to the short stories. Carefully observing her sculptures is like reading a good story in which the action and dialogue of the characters take you for a spin. The words are put together to let the reader experience the story without telling what the experience is like. The words written on the paper take their strength from what is not told to the reader. Just the precise significant details to evoke a mental space and what happened within.

We experience both the stories and the sculptures through action, words, thoughts, senses and feelings rather than through the authors/artists exposition, summarization and description.

In case of the sculptures I like to transpose it like this:
Tell = the title, literal use of materials, a shortcut, a clue
Show = the work, an action, an object, a metaphor

Whiteread seemed to also have an awareness when it comes to this theory as she choose to stop providing clues as to how to

interpret each piece. From this time on, all of her works – with the exception of Torsos – have been untitled.

In my ideal situation, the spectator can experience an artwork solemnly based on the interaction between their personal needs, associations, biases, fantasies, the presence and conduct of others around them, the situation in which they encounter the work and the artwork itself. Without interference of labels, guides, biography of the artist, gallery notes and the like. The same is true for distractions within an artwork. A work generally consists of basal elements and that what my sculptor teacher calls 'chitchat'. Elements that provide you with a kind of extra information that distracts from the essence of the work itself. The add-ons, adjectives, the appendicitis of an artwork.

However, in this case, researching and writing extensively about a few works in particular, I could not stay free of digesting that kind of additional information.

Despite my efforts to keep an objective eye, having read expert opinions on the works of Whiteread, July and Homes, irreversibly colours the way I see/read them. But as it turns out, not necessarily for the bad. It creates a kind of meta-awareness. Knowing about their lives, their wishes and dreams, makes it more likely for them to become intriguing characters in my thesis. It is this knowledge that I have about them, that I don't necessarily have to share with you, but that helps me in making this whole story more complete, more convincing, more true. The intrinsic information helps me to experience the personal truth in their works and hopefully (but that's not for me to judge) it helped me create/construct a new personal truth in my words about their works.

Conclusion

When you start making work, whatever it is, the way you know what you are doing is by knowing what you are NOT doing. It's not a matter of definition. You make a space for yourself by understanding, "I'm not that kind of artist", "I'm not like that, I'm not like that...". And then gradually the whole idea, the kind of false idea that you'll actually know what you are is bloody ridiculous and it never is realized. You ultimately only define through defining what you are not and by making works that feel true to you.

Looking at art through literature made it possible for me to get closer to understanding what it is I long for and it helped me find new ways for looking at my own practice. Knowing what my work is about helps it to transcend what I choose to leave **unsaid, untold, unstated.**

Now that I have experienced writing in an art context, I feel free to let go of the strict boundary between art and literature, or more precise, between the act of writing and the act of making art. During my research it came to my attention that the two fields are actually incredibly intertwined. There are numerous writers who make art and visual artists that write and those who are not first one and then the other (like July for example). Then there's the case of writers who aren't quite the visual artist, but who use visual arts as an outlet or source of inspiration in order to get rid of their writer's block. At the same time, during my research, I found many writers using the metaphor of the sculptor while talking/writing about their own work process. They talk about how the plot is sculpted with care to gradually reveal the premise to the audience. They say that creating a plot is no different than a sculptor taking chisel to stone. The idea is in place and it is now just a question of what steps are needed to make it tangible? They take it as

far as defining themselves in terms of being carvers or builders.

Writing this thesis, building it up with blocks of words and then carving away at the verbal brickstone masonry of my mind, I found out that it is not as much about what I can learn from writers, but what I learned from writing myself. Engaging in the research element of the process made me realize that there is nothing wrong with doing research, gathering additional information. As a matter of fact it can be intensely rewarding. But it is something that involves much more than just acquiring the opinions of others. It was in the writing itself where most of my discoveries took place. Just like it is in the building of my visual work where the research takes place and actual discoveries are done. Writing my thesis in the final year of my BA in fine arts turns out to be 100% comparable to making visual work: I do outline...but that outline changes as I do the actual writing/making, because that's where I really get to know the subject and its motivations. I've given up trying to get everything figured out at the outset. I think writing as well as making visual arts is an inherently recursive process. Which reminds me: better start rewriting my abstract.

Abstract 2.0

~~The hallway as a metaphor for a person at a specific time in their life. Beyond the personal narrative, what is the minimum sensory input one needs to perceive/feel/sense/experience a mental state? Is it possible to apply the literary theory of omission to my work? Making art as a writer. Write like a visual artist. Looking at parallels between the act of writing and making visual art in representing/registering a mind state using objects and spaces. What is an essence in art work and~~

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